

Weekly VLOG #5: Choice, Free Will, and the Prophecy

Welcome back to the Potter Pundits weekly VLOG at HogwartsProfessor now - your internet home for serious conversation about the Hogwarts Saga, the world's best selling books.

Today we're going to continue our conversation about the largely unexamined ideas that have come to shape our understanding of *Harry Potter* with a discussion about whether Harry's adventures are really the flag waving celebration of choice we have come to assume they are.

Before we jump into that fascinating and challenging subject, though, I have some news and a favor to ask. The news is that next week, Sunday, August 13, we'll be rolling out, pun intended, the Potter Pundit Summer School. Four free online classes in which we will take a deep dive into the artistry and meaning of Harry Potter.

Because we want this to be interactive to be sure the classes are about what you want to know, answers to your questions, we've built in two protections against "Gilder-speak."

First, we're going to include a live webinar in the Summer School where you can ask the questions you have in real time.

Second - I have put together a survey- 20 multiple choice questions that takes less than five minutes to fill out - that we've sent out to my email list of more than 5,000 Potterphiles who have heard my talks or written me in the last 15 years. The response has been incredible!

If you didn't get that email and would like to tell me what you want to learn in the free Harry Potter Summer School classes, there's a link to Survey Gizmo right under this video, next to the transcript button. Scroll down and take a look - see it? I'm giving away a \$100 Amazon gift card in a random drawing of names of those who complete the survey. Thank you for filling it out if you haven't already.

Okay, on to this week's subject - I'll remind you about the survey at the end!

Why do we think Harry Potter novels celebrate choice as a central theme?

Because Dumbledore tells us so again and again!

- “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”
- "Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right, and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good and kind and brave because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort."
- “In other words, you are free to choose your way, quite free to turn your back on the Prophecy!”

It's sufficiently up front as a theme, even in-your face, that I featured it in my first book, *Hidden Key to Harry Potter*, fifteen years ago and still count it among the Seven Keys to Unlocking Harry Potter, filed under 'Postmodernism.'

It's important and right, just as our other memes were true to a degree. But is it the whole story? I don't think so.

If choice is the free will to make decisions and to shape one's own way or destiny, what would the opposite be? We all nod our heads when Dumbledore tells Harry that our choices tell us what kind of people we are and that he's free to choose 'walk away' as his response to the Prophecy (if Voldemort would play along...), but what is the anti-thesis of choice, the possibility we are taught to ignore or are never told about?

Oddly enough, it's the contradictory idea of *determinism*, that we are slaves to our conditioning, our genetic hard wiring, our education, our economic status, or whatever the sociologists, psychologists, neurologists, and geneticists have decided is the fundamental reality we cannot escape. In fiction, this usually takes the shape of 'fate' or 'destiny' which in Harry Potter is embodied in Trelawney Prophecy #1 about the Boy Who Lived and the Dark Lord.

Which brings us to our problem. If it is our choices that reflect our freedom and whatever character and agency we may have, why is it that everyone seems locked into their destinies in the Hogwarts Saga? A second look at the books suggests Choice is not the end-all pass that we've always thought it was. Everyone's choices seem to fall in line with Prophecy parameters.

For one thing, the Department of Mysteries' heart and center is not the Agape Room where the Power of Love is held behind a door that cannot be opened. The center of Harry's there and back again adventure in the Department is in the cavernous Hall of Prophecy in which thousands of insights about the destiny of witches, wizards, and the world one assumes are reverently stored. Why would wizards give such importance to their preservation except that experience had demonstrated that some magical people do seem to have the capacity to discern a future that cannot be escaped, whatever our choices?

In *Reading Harry Potter Again*, there is a chapter by Patricia Donaher and James Okapal in which this exact question is discussed. It's called 'Causation, Prophetic Visions, and the Free Will Question in Harry Potter.' In it they dismantle Gregory Bassham's assertions in *Harry Potter and Philosophy* that "freedom of choice operates despite the deterministic elements in Sibyll Trelawney's hero prophecy" and that Bassham "does not argue effectively for the presence of free will in the Harry Potter universe, nor does he adequately address the role of prophecy in the series" (46). They argue against the simple libertarian of Bassham or deterministic views of Trelawney for a position – like real life – that is a resolution of the two, what is known as "compatibilism," in which free will and determinist influences both exist.

Donaper and Okapal, in other words, are saying that, no, characters in these books are subject to cause-and-effect in many ways and certainly the Prophecy is an important one. Unlike what Bassham imagines, Harry is not free to write his own story. He remains a hero, however, because, though he is to a some extent a victim of a story written for him in advance which he is unable to escape, he decides to *conform his will to that destiny*.

Remember what he says after Dumbledore says he is free to *choose* to walk away from the Prophecy, but Voldemort won't, so he cannot escape the confrontation? In some senses, it is as much a turning point in the book as his decision in Dobby's grave to pursue the Horcruxes as Dumbledore told

him rather than the Hallows. In Dumbledore's office, Harry switches from Gothic heroine on the run to adventure hero shouldering the burden of his fate:

Harry understood at last what Dumbledore had been trying to tell him. It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew – *and so do I*, thought Harry, with a rush of fierce pride, *and so did my parents* – that there was all the difference in the world. (*Prince*, 512)

Rowling and Macbeth witches

Rowling in the Spartz-Anelli interview in 2005 talked about the “Macbeth thing” in which she said she believed that the Weird Sisters didn't cause Macbeth to murder the king. Macbeth chose that destiny; he “made it happen.”

She seems to be suggesting there that her characters, like Macbeth, are free to act in compliance with or contrary to their predicted destinies. Clearly, though, the Macbeth analogy is not really about Harry's relationship with the Prophecy or the destiny consequent to it. The parallel Hogwarts Saga character to Macbeth is Voldemort, who believes in the Prophecy, who won't let go of it, and who creates the decision Harry has to make about being a victim to the destiny he didn't choose or a hero stepping up to meet what cannot be avoided.

Two other characters come to mind with respect to free will and destiny. The first is Dobby, who dies ‘A Free House Elf.’

Dobby struggles, however, throughout the books against the genetic or cultural programming that House elves have for obedience and service to human masters, good or bad. Though he escapes his fealty to his original Dark Lord masters by choosing to serve the heroic Harry Potter who is something akin to a divinity to him, his reflexes are to punish himself for his disloyalty.

And he is freakish in his capacity to make this jump and embrace what little freedom he is able to tolerate, right? Hagrid notes that there are freaks in

every breed with respect to Dobby and we see in the cases of Winky and Kreacher just how restricted they are as free agents. Determinism is a much, much greater part of their lives than free will and choice.

The Centaurs are important players, too.

The Centaurs seem to be fatalists, right? They are accomplished astrologers who can read the pre-determined future in the stars. They refuse to get involved with wizarding affairs, most notably in resistance to the inevitable, predestined return of the Dark Lord and great battle. They stand firm on the sidelines to watch fate play out.

They eventually choose to fight for the good guys - isn't that contrary to there being a mixed message about choice? Don't they choose in the end to throw their weight against the Dark Lord, astrology be damned?

Yes – and no.

Remember the Centaurs, except for Firenze, are not about right and wrong *per se* as principles but conformity to what is revealed in the stars. They're very much against individual choice and action in defiance of destiny or fate.

But they're not relativists with no idea of right or wrong at all. Just the opposite! They're astrological fundamentalists who won't tolerate any break with their ways or customs. They're law-bound, and obsessed with conformity/violation of their code, their idea of right and wrong as revealed in the stars.

When Hagrid shows them Harry's body as he walks out of the Forest, he points out to the "ruddy star-gazers" that it was *the conflict* that was destined - Hagrid and the more astute wizards always felt, too, that the Dark Lord would return - but that the outcome of the conflict was not. The Centaurs, now that the fated events had arrived as the stars told them it would, now had to decide if they were with the "no right and wrong, only power" Death Eaters, the nihilists, or with those who agreed with them that there was a natural law to which we must conform.

The Centaurs, of course, as natural law conformists and moralists, choose at that point to join in the destined conflict (the advent of which they were obliged by their code not to resist) on the side of those who believe in a

greater good than “what I want,” “what I have the power to take,” or even just “what I choose for myself.”

Conclusion

So, again, the meme is right but if we think it tells us the whole story we’re blinded to the more complex and richer truth.

- Yes, Harry Potter is a children’s story, but thinking of it that way exclusively blinds us to its complexity and layered meanings.
- Yes, Harry Potter is a seven novel series, but thinking of it that way exclusively means we miss the way the over-arching story is constructed through its seven chapters.
- Yes, Harry Potter is a schoolboy story, but it is also at least as much a parody and turning upside-down of that genre as well.

And, yes, Harry Potter is about making right choices against the flow, during the hard, right decision-making thing - but is not a two dimensional, libertarian celebration of free will or of postmodern individualism and relativism. Harry Potter’s real heroism is his choice to submit to the circumstances of his life, the Prophecy, that he cannot escape and confront them head on rather than as a victim.

Which, given the roles our genes, our material circumstances, our cultural metanarratives, our education, our upbringing, and all the things that shape our thinking, may be the best example for us all, locked up as we are to large degree in the stories we tell ourselves about what our lives are about. Harry’s story gives us a story-mirror to look into where we can see a hero who is not free to choose the life he wants but who chooses the best life he can have with the life-story he has found himself in. Not libertarianism, not determinism, bit compatibilism.

Thanks for joining me again this week! Please share your thoughts in the comment boxes below and ‘like’ this post on your favorite social media platform. Let me know, too, what subjects you want me to be sure to address in the Potter Pundit Summer School Classes that will start on 13 August – these are our first run at affordable, accessible, and interactive learning and your input and participation is essential – See you next week!